# Meeting the Unique Needs of the Children of Migrant Farm Workers

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The migrant population is the most undereducated major subgroup in the United States. The high school dropout rate of the children of migrant farm workers is 43 percent, higher than any other group in the United States (National Council of La Raza 1990). It is estimated that over 70 percent of migrants have not completed high school, and 75 percent are functionally illiterate (Hodgkinson 1985). Inadequate education coupled with meager language skills limit their employment potential for jobs that offer nothing more than a low hourly wage. For instance, migrant farm workers earn less than $5,000 per year (Rothenberg 1998), well short of the U.S. median household income of $40,800 per year (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999) and far below the 2002 U.S. poverty level of $18,100 for a family of four. With that type of income, more than two-thirds of our nation's migrant households and roughly 75 percent of migrant children live below the national poverty line (Davis 1997). Without education, many of the estimated 800,000 migrant children will inherit their parents' occupation and lifestyle as they attempt to sustain themselves (Trotter 1992).

The reasons for the lack of education among migrant workers are many, but the migrant lifestyle's high mobility serves as the greatest impediment to educational success. Estimates indicate that students lose as many as two weeks of school per move, with 25 percent of migrant students enrolling in school more than thirty days after the new school year begins (Research Triangle Institute 1992). Not only do they get a late start, but "some migrant families move in and out of school districts as many as ten times during a single school year" (Trotter 1992, 15). The frequent changes force the children to make numerous adjustments to new friends, academic expectations, and varying graduation requirements (Whittaker 1997).

Migrant families occupy a low status in communities because of their work, language differences, and ethnic background. The language barrier isolates migrant families and creates tension with local residents (Ford 1988). Migrant children sense that they do not belong, and their feelings of inferiority are often reinforced by their peers' thoughtlessness and teasing. The situation worsens when migrants become victims of stereotypes played out in the form of prejudice and discrimination. For example, teachers often believe that students with poor English skills are "slow" and therefore group them accordingly. This hinders the children's academic development and plays a significant role in promoting low self-esteem (Trotter 1992).

Migrant students "frequently find themselves in one traumatic situation after another. . . . Their confidence is shaken daily, and with each passing year, they show an increasing lack of trust in the school, community, and the larger society" (King-Stoops 1980, 21). The interruptions in their education and the inability of the school to understand their culture and meet their needs slowly deplete the child's perseverance toward graduation and play a major role in migrant students' dropping out of school (Velazquez 1996). With so many obstacles in the path of their educational success, rural migrant students may be the most disadvantaged student population in America (Perry 1997).

## Methods of Investigation

In this article, I briefly discuss findings from two qualitative studies conducted at a Summer Migrant Education Program (SMEP) in a rural school district in

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northwest Ohio.[1] The SMEP provides opportunities for local migrant children to attend an eight-week summer school in which they can continue their studies and progress toward graduation. This particular SMEP offers Migrant Summer Services to over 150 students, who are predominately Mexican Americans, with an average daily attendance of approximately seventy to eighty students. The SMEP is housed in a K–12 public school building that is located in a small rural town centrally located to the various migrant farm worker camps.

The initial research study examined the needs of migrant students and addressed the question, What knowledge do teachers need to acquire and what awareness must they develop to aid migrant students effectively in realizing their full potential? The researcher began by asking the following questions:

1. What are the unique needs of migrant students attending the SMEP in northwest Ohio, as perceived by teachers?
2. What do teachers need to know and do to help migrant children overcome academic, cultural, and language barriers, social isolation, and other factors such as prejudice and discrimination that may hinder academic achievement?
3. What role should the experiences and lives of migrant students play in the school, the classroom, and the curriculum?

The follow-up study examined the role that cultural capital plays in the education of migrant students as described by administrators, teachers, and migrant students themselves. It addressed the question, How does cultural capital that is dispensed in migrant families affect the educational experiences of migrant students? The author began by asking the following research questions:

1. What are the specific attributes of migrant cultural capital as described by administrators, teachers, and migrant students?
2. What types of ideological conflicts arise as the cultural capital of schools clashes with that of migrant students?
3. Does the cultural capital of migrant students hinder them from meeting specific educational standards, expectations, or requirements?

The findings from these studies are based on information gathered during a two-week initial study and a three-week follow-up study at the SMEP. Research techniques included formal and spontaneous interviews with administrators, faculty, and students; group interviews with students in grades 5–12; nonparticipant observation; classroom observation; and conversations with the migrant recruiter who spends a significant amount of time interacting with migrant parents.

Interviews were conducted using what Schumacher and McMillan (1993) termed the "interview guide approach." Topics were selected in advance, and the sequencing and wording of questions were determined by the researcher during each interview (see appendices A, B, and C for specific questions and topics of discussion). This type of interviewing provides the researcher with the means to use probing questions, which extends the information provided and allows additional questions to emerge from the context. This, in turn, permits a more thorough understanding of the respondent's perspectives and the reasons behind them. Chances that the information will be provided freely by the respondent, rather than be determined solely by the questions, are then increased.

In addition, researchers spent time following up with interviewees regarding various statements and information. The follow-up took the form of informal conversations that probed individuals to further explain and provide examples of previous statements. All formal individual and group interviews were taperecorded and transcribed, and the information was then analyzed. Through inductive analysis, various themes slowly emerged from the data. After several readings, the information was categorized according to topics that were predominantly derived from the data itself. Researchers identified pertinent examples and quotes from interviews and added them to the relevant categories. Information gained from various spontaneous conversations with faculty members and teacher aides, classroom observations, and nonparticipant observations were recorded, and relevant data was similarly categorized by topic. Finally, relevant literature was included to help contrast or support the themes.

In this article, I present the findings from interviews with fourteen teachers, two administrators, one migrant recruiter, and thirty-three migrant students. Additional information gained from observations of classrooms and student teacher interactions are integrated within the findings. These findings describe the unique needs of migrant students, some of the intricate aspects of migrant culture, and what teachers need to know and do to help the children of migrant farm workers overcome the many factors that hinder their academic achievement. Finally, I suggest ways that teachers can better meet the needs of migrant students, enabling them to attain academic success and realize their full potential.

## Findings and Results

The findings present several important problems that schools must understand and address to meet the needs of migrant students. Overall, findings indicate that there are several obstacles to the educational success of migrant students. First, many of the teachers were unaware of their own beliefs about migrant students

and were influenced by stereotypes that guided their behavior and actions. In interviews, teachers pointed out that they often lacked insight into their own teaching and how their view of migrant students played out in the classroom through the formal, hidden, and null curricula. For example, one teacher who grew up in the county where the school was located talked about how he had become aware of the stereotype he once held that migrant parents and their children did not value education or the opportunities that schools provided. He believed that type of thinking lowered his expectations of migrant students, which clearly affected their education.

Although the teachers understood the importance of integrating migrant culture into their teaching, several fell short in developing complex understandings of not only migrant culture, but also how the use of migrant students' cultural backgrounds can enhance their self-concepts and improve their chances for educational success. Every teacher interviewed talked about the need to understand migrant culture and to attempt to integrate that culture into the classroom in a meaningful way. Later discussion demonstrates teachers' various levels of accomplishment in doing that.

Finally, migrant students voiced their views of the problem areas that hamper their education and create trouble with teachers and other students. The students provided insight into several aspects of migrant culture that cause conflict with teachers and fellow students who fail to consider migrant perspectives. In the following discussion, I address the above issues more fully, provide examples, and offer suggestions as to how teachers can better meet the needs of migrant students.

## Critical Reflection: The Less Familiar Part of Teaching

The SMEP teachers who participated in this study indicated a need to engage in deliberate critical reflection to reveal their own prejudices or negative feelings, which are grounded in stereotypes about migrant families. Critical reflection is a deliberate, ongoing process of critically examining and refining educational practices, while considering the personal, pedagogical, social, and ethical aspects of teaching and schooling (Han 1995). The teachers argued that an essential part of this process is a conscious effort to examine some of the stereotypes that are embedded within a teacher's view of the world. More important is an understanding of the influence that those stereotypes have, because prejudices are not typically "expressed as simple exclusionary rules or hateful epithets. They are often cultural beliefs subtly enacted by well-meaning classmates and teachers, and their most devastating effects work from within the psyche of the affected person" (Oakes and Lipton 1999, 202). Because the teachers believe migrant stereotypes often influence their teaching, they point out that all teachers need to reflect on their views of migrant students and how stereotypes might affect their teaching.

From daily observations, it became apparent that classroom situations or derogatory comments by students, colleagues, and community members served as a catalyst for teachers' critical reflection. Teachers suggested that, based on those situations, educators must consider questions such as the following: What stereotypes do I hold of migrant students? Have those stereotypes influenced my thinking, decisions, or behavior? In class, what hidden messages do I transmit regarding migrant students? What role do I play in changing students' and other faculty's attitudes toward migrant students? To what degree should migrant students be forced to assimilate? Do I ever consider the cultural background of migrant students? How will I handle particular situations that might occur with migrant students? Not only should teachers reflect on their beliefs and views, but they must consider how educational practices might work to discourage or disadvantage migrant students.

Some of the teachers surveyed expressed the frustration, embarrassment, or feelings of inadequacy that often result from the reflective process. However, they believe that all teachers and administrators must engage in this process and, if needed, change their views and teaching practices. It seems that the more teachers reflect about their teaching of migrant students, the more aware they become of the unique needs of migrant students. This awareness enables them to make better sense of their work at school and in turn meet the needs of migrant students, which supports Palmer's argument that "the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it" (1998, 5). Critical reflection provides us with the insight to guide our practice.

## Cultural Conflicts: The Ways Migrant Students See the World

Prewitt-Diaz, Trotter, and Rivera (1990) argue that although migrant children come from different cultures and geographic areas, they seem to have developed common beliefs, values, norms, customs, and ways of seeing and understanding the world. Not only does a migrant culture exist, but it accompanies students to school and often serves as a source of conflict between migrant students and the school's values and beliefs.

In school, teachers praise students for such traits as being respectful, industrious, and obedient, or dressing and acting in a pleasing way. However, many of the traits valued by schools are, to a great extent, culturally inscribed. Students whose cultural background and behavior harmonize with faculty expectations are

considered academically and socially superior and are treated accordingly. Students whose cultural values are not as academically prized are labeled as disrespectful or unmotivated troublemakers, among other negative attributes.

This mislabeling often happens to migrant students in public schools. Both teachers and migrant students indicated that migrant culture includes a strong sense of family loyalty, a willingness to fight and defend family members, and a view of life situations as temporary. From student interviews, it was evident that migrant students embraced those values, and that at times their deeply ingrained beliefs conflicted with faculty, curriculum, and school rules. For example, from interviews with students, it was obvious that most migrant students are taught to defend family members, a value that can lead to fighting in school. Teachers agreed that, without an understanding of the students' reasons for fighting, many migrant students are labeled "violent" or "troublemakers." Migrant students pointed out that what the schools fail to consider is the difficult decision students face between obeying school rules and remaining committed to their family. Each choice has negative consequences—punishment from the school or punishment and disdain from parents and family members. However, not all fights are caused by students' "bad attitudes" or any other stereotype assigned them. Rather, cultural conflict could be the underlying reason for certain behavior.

Other cultural conflicts occur within school as well. For example, teachers made the case that the effects of frequent mobility on the way migrant students view school and their peers often caused conflict. The family's frequent uprooting leaves migrant children feeling unstable, that they have little control over their lives, and that many aspects of their lives are temporary. Why should migrant students invest time and energy in school or relationships and risk being hurt or disappointed when their situation changes so frequently? Teachers at the school pointed out that migrant students often withdraw from other students. They may not do as much academic work as they should, since they know they will be leaving soon. They are reluctant to get involved in sports or extracurricular activities because they will probably leave in the middle of the season. They might be more willing to challenge school rules, since it is doubtful they will face any long-term consequences.

Because of their willingness to challenge school rules, migrant students are accused of having a poor attitude, being lazy, not wanting to learn, and causing trouble. Teachers and classmates often consider migrant students' lack of involvement as rude and unfriendly, which reinforces previously held stereotypes and makes many migrant students easy targets for isolation, ridicule, and discrimination. In reality, this is how migrant students deal with the frustration, alienation, and lack of trust that accompanies their lifestyle's constant mobility.

Cultural conflicts can also arise within the curriculum. For example, the SMEP uses the Tough Guy program to reduce bullying and fighting in school. This particular program consists of a series of videotapes and follow-up materials. Students view the grade-appropriate tapes, which include various scenarios that illustrate the negative consequences of fighting and bullying students, and then teachers conduct a follow-up discussion.

Clearly the school's use of the Tough Guy program was meant as a positive attempt to reduce violence and develop values and skills like tolerance, acceptance, and self-control. However, the program created conflict with many migrant students. For example, students expressed the following concerns about the Tough Guy program and the messages it conveyed:

> Student: Our parents taught us . . . to defend ourselves. That Tough Guy stuff isn't going to change us.

> Student: That's [the Tough Guy program] dumb. . . . That's not what we believe!

> Student: The program was not very real. . . . That's against our migrant stuff. The examples were so dumb. At least that guy could have pushed him back or something. He just stood there. That's dumb. . . . Anybody pushes me or my blood they will be sorry!

From these comments, it is clear that the Tough Guy program creates an ideological conflict within migrant students. They are aware of the school's intention to change their behavior, but at the same time they resist the change because of the their cultural backgrounds. This conflict and resistance is evident in some of the follow-up sessions. Students gave examples of situations where they felt that there was no other choice than to fight. Several students provided teachers with hypothetical situations in an attempt to justify fighting, and some even asked for the teacher's thoughts regarding how they might act in particular violent situations. These responses indicate how migrant students must struggle with conflicts between what they are taught at home and what they are taught at school.

The research illustrates a variety of cultural conflicts between the school, and its curriculum, and the way migrant families view the schooling process. The main problem is teachers limit their understanding of migrant students' behavior and attitudes to their own cultural framework, never considering that the students often see the world much differently. Because of clashes between the values of the school and the migrant culture, migrant students are accused of being disrespectful, lazy, aggressive, violent, indifferent, and of having a bad attitude, when in reality, the opposite may be true.

## The Importance of Cultural Relevancy

Because cultural conflicts are common between migrant students and teachers, the SMEP teachers acknowledged that they must be willing to learn about migrant culture and integrate that knowledge into the curriculum and student interactions. However, this means more than having an appreciation for Mexican food and holidays. Rather, some teachers indicated there is a need to construct understandings that not only include the objective aspects of culture, such as artifacts, food, and clothing, but also include the less tangible subjective dimensions such as ways of talking, acting, and socializing, styles of dress, likes and dislikes, tastes, competencies, behaviors, attitudes, values, and beliefs. In this sense, culture is viewed as "the particular ways in which a social group lives out and makes sense of its given circumstances and conditions in life" (McLaren 1998, 175).

During interviews, teachers indicated that anyone who teaches migrant students must read and apply the research and literature about migrancy and migrant education, attend conferences or other relevant in-service programs when possible, and develop positive and informative interaction with migrant students and families. They suggested teachers should encourage migrant students to write or tell about their life experiences and ask questions of students, parents, and experienced teachers, because they will gain valuable insight into migrant culture and migrants' complex ways of viewing the world. If possible, teachers should visit migrant camps and homes to gain important insight into the migrant lifestyle.

Also, students from microcultures, such as migrant students, learn and adapt to school culture more readily when their home culture is recognized and serves as a basis for instruction (Campbell 1996). Accordingly, teachers pointed out that lessons should be designed in a manner that builds on migrant students' strengths and connects to their unique life experiences or prior knowledge. For example, migrant students travel and study in several states, so the use of their geographical knowledge is a nice starting point. Furthermore, teachers argued that incorporating migrant culture into the curriculum through the use of relevant literature allows migrant students to capitalize on their own life experiences, which will help them not only to understand the content, but later to transfer this knowledge to other content areas. However, it is important that these readings should be evaluated to determine if the language and style is appropriate, if migrant perspectives are presented in a nonstereotypic manner, and if migrant contributions to society are accurately presented.[2]

## Discussion and Suggestions for Teachers

Unlike traditional public school students, migrant children and their families have unique needs that must be met to remove some of the barriers to their academic success. First, it is imperative schools and teachers integrate "the work we do in class and the lives that [students] live outside of class" (Giroux and Simon 1992, 224). Teachers should develop knowledge about the complexities of migrant culture and then begin to use that information in their teaching and interaction with migrant students.

Second, migrant students are in desperate need of consistency in their school experiences because they spend parts of each academic year in different schools across the country. Teachers should develop innovative strategies that will help make transitions smoother. For example, initiating a migrant advisor program, in which advisors act as permanent liaisons with the family, gives students personal contact with the same teacher each year and thus provides some consistency. Other mentoring programs can be developed to provide consistency from year to year and to help migrant students be a part of the group. For example, mature students could be assigned to act as mentors or buddies to migrant students. Each year, when migrant students return to the school, the mentor can continue the relationship. Both migrant and nonmigrant students would gain from this experience.

It is also vital that teachers provide consistency regarding curriculum. They can see to it that they receive training in the use of the Migrant Student Record Transferring System (MSRTS). The MSRTS tracks each migrant student's progress, and records are maintained and transferred to the student's home-base school. The system provides teachers with quick and accurate access to academic information so that the student's instructional program can be quickly and appropriately designed to meet the student's ability and skill level. This enables teachers to determine credits earned and coursework taken elsewhere, and to avoid overlap of academic content.

Third, migrant students need a positive learning environment. During the school year, migrant students repeatedly find themselves in new and unfamiliar classroom situations. This can lead to loneliness and feelings of isolation, especially if there are few minority students in the school. Teachers can play a key role in helping migrant students overcome those feelings by modeling respect and preventing any teasing or ridicule from other students. In a sense, the teachers must serve as advocates for migrant students, and they must provide a safe and positive learning environment.

Fourth, the use of culturally relevant literature is important in migrant education. When possible, readings and class discussions should address issues such as life in the fields, the mobility of migrant families, prejudice, racism, and problems that migrants face when they become permanent residents of a community. This

enables migrant students to engage in the process of "naming," that is, to identify and define "those social and economic relationships that most clearly affect students' lives, particularly the inequitable distribution of power and resources" (McLaren 1998, 233). Naming social inequities and their effects on students' lives is the initial step in permitting students to analyze their own life situations and to develop an understanding of why things are the way they are. This, in turn, may help students more fully understand their particular situation, enhance their self-esteem, and develop appropriate responses. If properly used, literature and lessons that teach about the plight of migrant students would prove worthwhile to nonmigrant students by providing the means to better understand their peers' life circumstances and shattering migrant stereotypes.

Fifth, enhancing migrant students' self-concept is important to the education process. Teachers must find opportunities where migrant students can demonstrate responsibility and experience success. If possible, schools should avoid any type of pull-out tutoring programs that separate and isolate migrant children from classmates. Instead, teachers should make sure that migrant students are part of the group and take time with them, demonstrating that they are important and add value to the school. Furthermore, teachers must be aware of the workings of cultural conflicts, be able to interpret them with a critical eye, and be able to deal with conflicts in a manner that honors migrant values.

Research informs us that migrant students do well in cooperative learning settings because the atmosphere is one of encouragement and support (Johnson, Johnson, and Maruyama 1983). For migrant students, cooperative learning strategies will lower the anxiety of school and increase self-esteem and motivation, areas in which migrant students are clearly lacking. They will also provide opportunities for other students to get to know migrant students.

Finally, teachers must realize that migrant parents are anxious about school because they have inadequate experience as both a student and parent. Teachers can ease anxiety and involve migrant parents by recognizing and welcoming them. They can initiate information sessions for migrant parents (at a time convenient for families) that address the concerns about school and the community that are unique to migrant families. Teachers can educate parents about their important role in their children's education and address issues such as teacher expectations, grading procedures, communication with the school, and any other needs of the migrant families in their school districts.

Migrant parents usually lack the language skills needed to communicate successfully with teachers and administrators. Often the children serve as translators for their parents. When the school translates the correspondence it sends home, it not only improves communication but creates an environment where migrant parents feel comfortable entering the school and acting as advocates for their children. Gaining the confidence of migrant families is important, and parents are more likely to become involved if teachers demonstrate a genuine care and interest for their child.

It is clear that migrant students present a challenge to schools. At the same time, they can enrich the educational experiences of all students by bringing to the classroom their diversity, travel experiences, and bilingual fluency. Only when teachers begin to understand, respect, and integrate the culture of migrant students into the daily workings of school can migrant children attain academic success and realize their full potential.

*Key words: migrant students, cultural differences, stereotypes, prejudice*

## NOTES

1. For additional discussion regarding research questions, methods, and findings, see Romanowski 2001 and forthcoming.
2. See Whittaker 1997 for a comprehensive evaluation checklist.

## APPENDIX A

### Possible Topics and Questions for Teachers from the Initial Study

What do you see as the purpose of the summer migrant program?
What are the needs of migrant students during summer?
Are these needs different from those of mainstream white kids?
How are these students different from white students? Other minorities?
How can their needs be met during the school year?
How do you integrate their culture into the curriculum?
How is their culture respected within the curriculum?
Can you provide any examples of the curriculum teachers are using to accomplish this?
Would you teach all white students differently?
How did the migrant students cross the borders?
Do you have any examples of when you first started teaching migrant students? Any tips for other teachers?
Have you noticed any student self-concept issues?
Have you encountered issues of prejudice and stereotypes?
What valuable information do you have about teaching migrant students that would be important for other teachers?

## APPENDIX B

### Possible Topics and Questions for Teachers from the Follow-up Study

Will you describe what a successful student is?
What does it take to be a successful student in your classroom?
Can you give me a list of skills, values, and characteristics that migrant students need to do well in school?
Are there any successful migrant students? If so, describe why they are successful.
How do successful migrant students differ from unsuccessful students?
What values and skills do migrant students need to attain educational success (as they define it)?
What prevents migrant students from being successful? Examples?
What skills do traditional white students have that migrant students do not, and how does this help them attain educational success?
Is compliance to school standards a relevant issue?

## APPENDIX C

### Possible Questions for Students from the Follow-up Study

Are you successful in school?
What does it mean to be successful or do well in school?
Do you want to be successful in school? Why or why not?
What do you need to do to get good grades/be successful in school?
What do you need to do to please the teacher?
Think of the "best" student in this migrant school. What do they have that makes them successful? How are they different from you?
Can you provide a list of skills, values, and characteristics that you need to do well in school?
Do you ever have conflicts with teachers and the school? Provide examples.
Do you ever disagree with what you are being taught in this school?
What standards are students and parents expected to meet?

## APPENDIX D

### Web Resources for Teachers of Migrant Students

ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, http://aelvis.ael.org/eric/migrant.htm.
National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu.
U.S. Department of Education's Office of Migrant Education, http://www.ed.gov/offices/oese/mep/.

## APPENDIX E

### Print Resources for Teachers of Migrant Students

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